The 2014 exam needs report

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Executive summary

The aim of the exam needs survey was to understand the perceived needs of recently Fellowed GPs who undertook the Australian General Practice Training (AGPT) program preparing for general practice Fellowship in Australia. This is the first report of its kind conducted by General Practice Registrars Australia (GPRA) and contains an analysis of the survey results.

73% of respondents reported sitting the exam when they felt ready, and the remainder sat the exams because others within regional training providers (RTPs), such as GP supervisors or medical educators, suggested they do so.

The survey results indicate that respondents and RTPs recommended similar timeframes for exam preparation. Over 50% suggested preparing between 3–6 months and over 29% suggested preparing between 6–9 months before the exams.

Peers, family and personal life play a big part in GP registrar exam preparation. For example, 96% of respondents found that tips from other registrars, GPs or medical educators were the most used and effective resource for exam preparation. Respondents also felt they received the most support from their family and friends (98%), and their peers (98%).

Respondents prepared several months longer for the Applied Knowledge Test/Key Feature Problems exam (AKT/KFP) than the Objective Structured Clinical Exam (OSCE). The actual time spent studying also reflected this. Respondents prepared more than 6–10 hours per week for the AKT/KFP and less than 6–10 hours per week for the OSCE. Most respondents reported studying frequently on weekday evenings, weekend mornings and weekend afternoons.

Almost two thirds (65%) of respondents reported taking time off work to prepare for exams. Reasons for not taking leave were that respondents felt they studied enough already, or used their clinical sessions as exam preparation. 8% felt obligated to continue working and 4% mentioned financial reasons. The largest barrier to effective study was managing study, work and personal life (83%), followed by finding time to study (58%) and knowing what to study (27%).

Multiple exam preparation resources were deemed useful, however 25% did not know about DVD or textbook resources.

Exam preparation courses and workshops held by RTPs or other organisations were well received where they were face-to-face sessions and less so when held online. A similar trend was seen for self-funded courses, with face-to-face reported as most useful. Interestingly 40% were not aware of online webinars. Mock exams, written cases or questions in any delivery mode (face-to-face/online/print) were well received, but again DVD and applications were less known and used.

The results of this survey can be used by exam candidates and RTPs to prepare for general practice examinations. Recommended study preparation timelines and hours spent studying will assist exam candidates to ensure sufficient preparation time. The extensive exam resources list, will assist exam candidates to access the full range of recommended resources.

Tips from other registrars or GPs were reported as the most used and effective exam resource in question 15. As a result GPRA has commissioned The general practice exam book. The book contains tips, but also examples and practice questions by new Fellows. A self care section has been included as registrars reported feeling most stressed during exam preparation in question 18.
Survey methodology

The platform used to deliver the survey was Survey Monkey (surveymonkey.com). The survey was open for a period of 4.5 weeks from 19 June to 21 July 2014.

The survey was advertised to GPRA members, and to GP Registrars via the GPRA Advisory Council. The GPRA Advisory Council is made up of the Registrar Liaison Officers (RLOs) from each Regional Training Provider (RTP) and National Registrar Representatives from various stakeholder organisations. An email to all new Fellow GPRA members was also sent.

The survey received a total of 80 responses. To be eligible to complete the survey respondents needed to have completed the AGPT program within the last two years. Of the 80 respondents, 52 were eligible to complete the survey.

Of the 28 disqualified respondents:
- five respondents were not/had not been enrolled in AGPT
- five respondents were awaiting assessment results
- nine Fellowed more than two years from the survey date
- nine have not completed all assessments.

The questions and data are shown together along with n = number of respondents.

The results of the survey include exam preparation relating to The Royal Australian College of General Practitioners (RACGP) AKT, KFP exam and OSCE. The Australian College of Rural and Remote Medicine (ACRRM) assessments were included in the survey questions, however they have been excluded from the analysis as less than 4% of respondents answered ACRRM assessment related questions.
Fellowship/s obtained

Question 3. Which Fellowship/s are you training towards or have obtained?

n=52. 100% of respondents reported training towards or achieving FRACGP. 12% of respondents were also training toward or had obtained FARGP. 4% of respondents were also training toward or had obtained FACRRM.
Exam readiness

Question 4. How did you (initially) decide you were exam ready?

n=49. 73% of respondents initially decided to sit the exams because they felt adequately prepared. The remainder of respondents (27%) decided to sit the exam as they were advised to sit at a certain point or their GP Supervisor or medical educator advised they were ready to sit the exams.

Exam attempts

Question 5. How many times did you attempt each exam?

One respondent sat the AKT exam twice and another reported sitting the KFP three times. The remaining respondents reported sitting each exam (AKT, KFP and OSCE) only once.

Exam preparation timeframes
n=52. Peers and RTPs suggested similar timeframes to begin preparing for exams, that being 3–6 months, followed by 6–9 months, 9–12 months and then 1–3 months.

Question 6. On average, what timeframe was suggested by your peers to be appropriate to prepare for your exams?

![Peer Timeframe Pie Chart]

Question 7. On average, what timeframe was suggested by your RTP to be appropriate to prepare for your exams?

![RTP Timeframe Pie Chart]
Question 8. Thinking about your exam preparation, what timeframe did you begin studying before each of the following exams?

n=52. Respondents reported mostly preparing for the AKT and KFP exam for between 3–6 months (42%) and between 6–9 months (32%). However, the respondents reported mostly preparing for the OSCE for between 1–3 months (44%) and 3–6 months (25%). Respondents prepared several months longer for the AKT and KFP than for the OSCE.
Average hours of study per week

Question 9. On average how many hours per week did you study for each of the following exams?

n=52. The time spent studying per week reflected a similar pattern to Question 8 – respondents started studying earlier and dedicated more hours to prepare for the AKT/KFP than for the OSCE.

Most respondents reported studying between 6–10 hours per week for the AKT (53%) and the KFP (53%) or more. However for the OSCE most respondents reported studying 0–5 hours (40%) and 6–10 hours (32%) per week.
Actual and recommended study timelines

AKT and KFP exam preparation timelines
The responses to the AKT and KFP exam preparation times were combined to simplify the below graph.

Compared to actual exam preparation time, respondents recommended that their peers begin studying earlier. That is, between 3–6 months (48%) and 6–9 months (38%) for the AKT and KFP exams.

No respondent recommended beginning less than 1 month before the exams.
The majority of respondents recorded studying between 1–3 months (44%), 3–6 months (25%) and 9–12 months (11%) for the OSCE, and similar to the AKT and KFP exam recommended preparation times, respondents again recommended earlier start times of 3–9 months for their peers.
Time and location of exam preparation

Question 11. What time of the day did you undertake your exam preparation?
n=49. Most respondents reported studying frequently on weekday evenings, weekend mornings and weekend afternoons.
Time off to study

Question 12. In the lead up to the exam, did you take time off from work in order to study?

n=51. Almost two thirds (65%) of respondents reported taking time off work to prepare for exams.
Question 13. If you did not take time off to study what are some of the reasons why you did not take leave to study?

n = 15. Reasons for not taking leave were that respondents felt they studied enough already or used their clinical sessions as exam preparation. 8% felt obligated to continue working and 4% mentioned financial reasons.

Of the respondents that selected other, 70% reported they did not take time off to study as continuing to work in the general practice setting was exam preparation.
Barriers to effective study

Question 14. Did you face any barriers to effective exam preparation? Please select all that apply.

n=52. The biggest barrier to effective exam preparation was seen to be managing study, work and personal life balance (83%), followed by finding time to study (58%) and knowing what to study (27%). Exam techniques and marking criteria were not well understood (52%) and were perceived as barriers for effective exam preparation.

In the free text area, one respondent listed being located in a rural area as a barrier to effective study as it involved long travel times to and from work.
Exam preparation resources

Question 15. Did you use any of the the following resources during your exam preparation?

n=51. Interestingly the most effective resource used by respondents were the tips from other registrars, GPs or medical educators (96%), highlighting the importance of peer support and mentoring in exam preparation.

ACRRM or RACGP online learning platforms (78%) were also identified as effective exam preparation tools. 33% of respondents found the ACRRM or RACGP curriculum effective, however; 30% did not find it effective. 70% of respondents used the relevant college fellowship handbook/s, with 56% finding it effective in exam preparation.

Many respondents were aware of, but did not utilise, the DVD preparation course (40%). Over 30% of respondents did not know about available DVD and textbook resources provided by their RTP or available for loan. These results may be skewed due to their availability being different between RTPs.

Other resources utilised were (open-ended response):
- Australian Doctor; AFP
- eTGs, UpToDate, BMJ OnExamination
- ICPC codes
- passmedicine.com
- Past exam papers
- Oxford Handbook of General Practice.

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Courses and workshops

Question 16. Did you attend any of the following courses or workshops that were provided at no cost to you by your Regional Training Provider (RTP) or other party?

n=51. Funded pre-exam face-to-face courses or sessions were attended and reported as useful (86%). 10% of respondents were aware of such funded workshops but did not attend them.

Many respondents (18%) were unaware of funded online exam workshops, which may be due to differing availability across the different RTPs.

Of the 54% of respondents who attended online exam workshops, 85% found them useful and 15% did not find them useful.
Self-funded courses and workshops

Question 17. Did you pay to attend any of the following courses or workshops (open-ended response)?

n=50. 60% of respondents reported that they attended self-funded pre-exam face-to-face workshops and found them useful. There was less attendance at self-funded face-to-face workshops than those provided at no cost.

17% of respondents were aware of the face-to-face workshops but didn’t attend them. 38% of respondents were not aware of online workshops, such as webinars or teleconferences.

Those who responded that they were aware of the courses or workshops but did not attend, provided the following reasons:
- “Cost of the courses (and the exams being very expensive)”
- “Didn't feel the need to attend”
- “Preferred to spend that time studying”
- “Heard the courses were not useful.”

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Was not aware
Was aware and didn’t attend
Attended and it was useful
Attended and it wasn’t useful
Exam practice

Question 18. Did you use the following to practice for the exam/s?

n=51. Face-to-face mock exams (92%), practice written exams (on a website) (82%) and online mock exams (78%) were deemed the most used and effective practice for exams. Of those who used practice written exams, 6% did not find them useful.

31% of respondents sat the official exam for practice. The results of sitting the official exams for practice are unknown and respondents may have passed exams the first time or may have required further attempts.

Some themes reported by respondents in ‘Other methods of practicing’ were study groups, working in a general practice clinic and role-playing cases with peers.
Working with others

**Question 19. Did you work with others in your exam preparation?**

n=50. Study groups organised by respondents or their peers were used by 82% of respondents, however 6% of respondents did not find them useful. Results relating to sessions with medical educators or study groups organised by RTPs may be skewed as support differs between RTPs.

**Question 20. Are there any reasons you didn’t prepare for your exams with your peers (open-ended response)?**

n=14. A key theme from the free text answers was that study groups were primarily used for OSCE preparation, whereas respondents preferred studying alone for the written exams.

Other common responses included that it was difficult to prepare with peers due to differing learning styles, challenges finding suitable study partners and difficulties with travel due to being located in a rural area.
GP registrar wellbeing and support

Question 21. Please rate your level of stress during the following.
n=50. Levels of stress experienced by registrars varied depending on the timing relating to exams. Most registrars reported experiencing the most stress during their exam preparation.

![Stress levels graph]

- Very stressed
- Somewhat stressed
- Not at all stressed
Question 22. Please rate the level of support received during exam preparation by the following?

n=50. Respondents felt they received the most support from their family and friends (98%) and their peers (98%).

Interestingly 38% of respondents did not feel supported by their RTP.

Question 23. What did you find most stressful during your exam preparation (open-ended response)?

n=45. Respondents reported various stresses during exam preparation. Those with more than one response were:
- Not knowing what to cover and how much (10)
- Work and life balance (8)
- Finding time to study (5)
- Personal matters or commitments (3)
- Fear of failing (2)
- Getting through resources (2)
- Time lag involved with receiving written exam results and finding out of eligibility to sit OSCE (2).
Question 24. What strategies did you implement to ensure personal wellbeing during your exam preparation (tick all that apply)?

n=43. Respondents utilised several strategies to ensure personal wellbeing during exam preparation. 81% of respondents reported taking regular breaks.

Respondents also reported using strategies that involved family, friends and peers to ensure personal wellbeing during exam preparation.
Resources and tips

Question 25. What exam resource/s would have helped you and why (open-ended response)?

n=39. 21% of respondents reported that practice or past exams with answers and access to the check Program (18%) would have helped.

The six most reported resources that would have helped were:
- Practice/past exams with answers (8)
- Access to the RACGP Check program (7)
- Australian Family Physician (3)
- John Murtagh’s General Practice (3)
- How to treat (2)
- UpToDate (2)

Other resources identified by single respondents were:
- Access to:
  - eTG
  - Better quality lectures on DVD
  - Think GP Online
  - RACGP Online
  - GPRA
  - Therapeutic Guidelines
  - GP Learning
  - Clinical OSCE handbook
  - On Examination
  - Dot Medic
  - Susan Wearne, Clinical cases for general practice
  - Understanding how exams are marked
  - Knowing the RACGP domains
  - Online study groups
  - More support from work and peers
  - Exam workshops
  - Online platform to discuss exam questions
  - RTP online resources.

Question 26. Would you do anything differently when it comes to exam preparation (open-ended response)?

The five most reported responses were:
- Start preparing and studying for the exams earlier (5)
- Lowering stress levels during exam preparation (5)
- Being more organised and planning exam preparation ahead (4)
- Focusing on the day to day work in general practice (3)
- Prepare and study with others via face-to-face or online (3).

Question 27. What is your top tip for GP registrars sitting their exams (open-ended response)?

The five most reported responses were:
- Start preparing for exams earlier (13)
- Join a study group (13)
- See patients and use your day to day general practice presentations (6)
- Use mock/practice exams (4)
- Study regularly (3).